

14

SIR THOMAS BROWNE :

THE STORY OF HIS SKULL, HIS WIG, AND HIS COFFIN PLATE.

BY

REV. CANON F. J. MEYRICK,

ST. PETER MANCROFT VICARAGE, NORWICH.

A PATHETIC irony seems to follow the great author of the *Religio Medici*, *Urn Burial*, and *Vulgar Errors*, even beyond the grave.

"To be knav'd out of our graves, to have our skulls made drinking bowls and our bones turned into pipes . . . are tragicall abominations escaped by burning burials."

The writer of these words suffered at least a part of a "tragicall abomination," for his skull, though never "made into a drinking bowl," was almost certainly "knav'd" out of his grave. In the chancel of the great Church of St. Peter Mancroft, Norwich, is a tablet which tells us that—

"Near to the foot of this pillar lies Sir Thomas Browne Knight and Doctor in Physick, the author of *Religio Medici* and other learned Bookes, who practis'd Physick in ye City 46 years and died Oct 19 1682 in ye 77th year of his Age," etc., etc.

The story of the "knaving" is, and must always be, wrapt in some mystery. This much is known. In 1840 the aged incumbent, the Rev. John Bowman, was mourning the loss of his wife. A grave was being prepared for her in the chancel of the church. A local antiquary, whose "acquisitive complex" was abnormally developed even for an antiquary, took from the coffin of Sir Thomas Browne the coffin plate, which was broken when forced from the lead coffin. Though he strenuously denied the theft and declared the coffin plate was in the possession of the sexton, yet in 1893, fifty-three years later, the broken plate was found in his desk among his acquired treasures and rightly returned by his executors to the church from whence he had borrowed it.

The coffin plate, which is now restored, is carefully preserved by the church authorities as near as is convenient to its original resting place. It is in the form of an heraldic escutcheon measuring 7 in. by 6 in., and broken into two nearly equal halves. On it are engraved remarkable words, of which Sir Thomas's eldest son, Edward Browne, was the

author. Edward, like his father, was a ripe scholar and a great traveller. He was the author of an extraordinarily interesting book of travels in divers parts of Europe, "printed for Benj. Tooke, at the Sign of the *Ship* in St. Paul's Church-yard MDCLXXXV." He had the reputation of being the best bred man of Charles II's Court, was President of the College of Physicians, and physician to St. Bartholomew's Hospital. The words read as follows:

"Hoc loculo indormiens corporis spagyrici pulvere plumbum in aurum convertit" ["Sleeping in this grave, by the dust of his alchemic body he changes the lead to gold"].

The acquisitive antiquary who claimed to have looked into the coffin declared that the lead of the coffin had actually decomposed and changed to carbonate which crumbled at the touch. However, as we have seen, little reliance can be set upon the witness of this man. This same antiquary declared in 1847 that seven years before, looking into the coffin, he saw not only the skull but also the hair of Sir Thomas Browne, and he described the hair as "profuse and perfect and of a fine auburn colour."

Meanwhile, in 1845, a skull had been presented to the hospital as that of Sir Thomas Browne. Unfortunately there is no record of the gift in the hospital books. Since 1845 the skull and some hair have been preserved in the hospital museum, of late years in a silver casket, presented by the late Professor Osler, perhaps the greatest authority in his day on Sir Thomas and his writings.

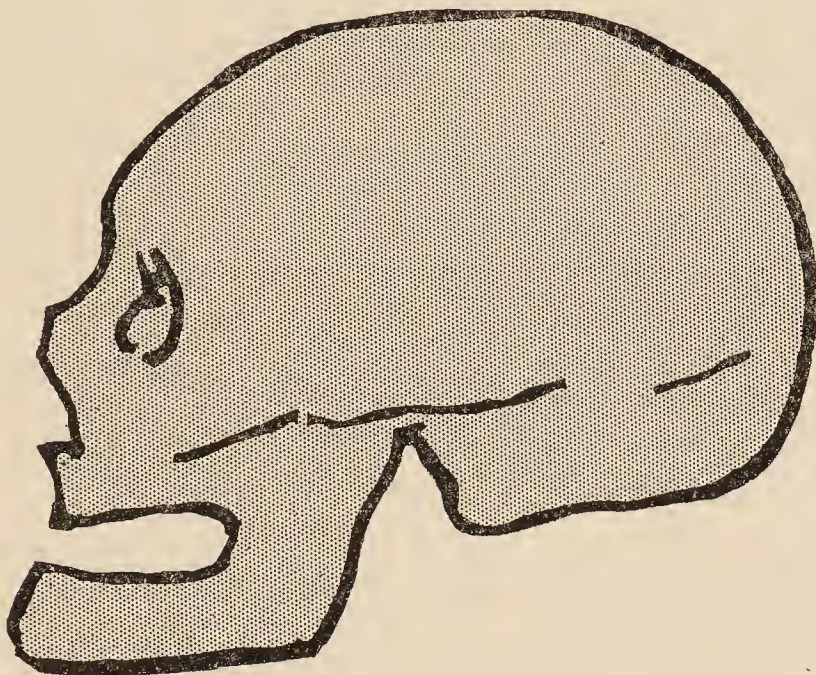
Many questions have been asked about the skull. No one knows who stole it or by what means it reached a certain Dr. Lubbock, who is said to be the donor of the relic to the hospital. It has been suggested, without a shadow of evidence, that the sexton stole the skull, hawked it about Norwich, and finally sold it to Dr. Lubbock. Now the sexton in 1840, when the grave was "knave'd," was a most worthy and loyal servant of the church. His son followed him, and his grandson, a great lover of Sir Thomas, is serving the church to-day. The sexton of 1840 was a man of considerable means, for he could afford to present the church that he served with such fidelity with a beautiful oak door.

Did the antiquary, who was the only man who claimed to have seen the skull and who most certainly "borrowed" the coffin plate, also "borrow," with or without the churchwardens' consent, the skull? It looks like it. Yet in dealing with relics, it is wise to walk warily. Did the antiquary really look into the grave? The story of the thick head of hair is not very convincing. For is it possible that a man who lived to 77 and who for forty years was responsible for a great practice should have died with a head covered with profuse auburn hair? There are many possibilities. It is possible that Sir Thomas was buried in his wig. It is possible, on the other hand, that the antiquary, satisfied with the coffin plate, never looked into the coffin at all. It is even possible, though unlikely, that the faithful old sexton with dry humour palmed off another skull (in 1840 the crypts were choked with them) on to the greedy antiquary.

Clearly we must walk warily. Orthodoxy and dogma are dangerous in matters relating to relics. The great philosopher's own words (*Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, Chapter V) warn us of the danger of credulity :

“ A third cause of common Errors, is the Credulity of men, that is, an easie assent to what is obtruded ; or a believing at first ear, what is delivered by others. This is a weakness in the understanding, without examination assenting unto things, which from their Names and Causes do carry persuasion ; whereby men often swallow falsities for truths, dubiosities for certainties, sensibilities for possibilities, and things impossible, as possibilities themselves. Which, though a weakness of the Intellect, and most discoverable in vulgar heads ; yet hath it sometimes fallen upon wiser brains, and great advancers of Truth.”

And this cause of error, the philosopher tells us, is supinity or neglect of inquiry, “ rather believing than going to see ; or doubting with ease and gratis, than believing with difficulty and purchase.”



Rough tracing showing the skull with its low and depressed forehead.

Let us therefore “ go to see.” In the museum of the hospital there is the skull. At first sight, with little or no knowledge of craniology, we would say: This cannot possibly be the skull of Sir Thomas Browne—that low, receding, depressed forehead is never that behind which the *Religio Medici* was conceived.

We look elsewhere for evidence of the shape of the philosopher's head. There are, fortunately, no less than four contemporary portraits. There is one in the treasury of St. Peter Mancroft—a half-length, three-quarter face. The portrait was presented to the church by Dr. Edward Howman, who owned and occupied Sir Thomas Browne's house after the philosopher's death. A second portrait is in the Bodleian Library—also a half-length and three-quarter face, and was probably painted in 1671 or 1672, just after Sir Thomas had been knighted. A third portrait is in the

Royal College of Physicians, London, and represents Sir Thomas as somewhat older than in the other two pictures.

In all three pictures, though there are differences in cast of countenance and in details of dress, you see a noble face of a man of over sixty. There is a touch of melancholy in each face, and each picture represents a man who, so far from having the straitened forehead of the fool, rejoiced in the noble, intellectual forehead of a scholar. This is what one would expect, unless one had been to the museum and seen the skull.

There is a fourth and less well known portrait. It is at Devonshire House, Piccadilly, and some years ago the Duke of Devonshire kindly allowed it to be photographed and published in Norwich. It is probably the work of Van Somer, a Dutch artist who came to England in 1606. It represents the Browne family when Thomas was a few years old. Thomas Browne, mercer of London, and Anne his wife, are with their four children, Anne, Jane, Mary, and the future Sir Thomas. Even at this early age Thomas has a high forehead, the child's eyes being actually nearer the point (if a child's chin has a point!) of the chin than the top of the forehead.

Another possibility has been suggested. Dr. Beverley, a great collector of all that concerns Sir Thomas, sends me a copy of a MS. in the British Museum. It reads as follows and throws a new possibility on the skull's authenticity :

"The late Dr. Jeffery gave notice to Sir Thomas Browne's nearest relative that his vault wanted Reparation, who sent him word it might be filled up, which when the Dr. knew, desired that he might be interr'd thereon, who shortly after Dying His corpse was deposited in the Vault and afterwards filled up with earth and over the Doctor on a stone is this Ins: *Johannis Jeffery, S.T.P., etc. etc. 1720 anno aet. suae 73.*"

From this we learn that soon after the burial of Sir Thomas Browne in 1682 his vault was filled up with soil, and that in 1720 the grave was opened, and over the coffin of Sir Thomas Browne was laid the body of Dr. Jeffery. This John Jeffery was vicar, or, as he was then called, minister, of St. Peter Mancroft, for forty-two years, from 1678 to 1720. He was appointed Archdeacon of Norwich in 1694. Sir Thomas Browne, who lived hardly a stone's throw from this church, was for four years not only his greatest parishioner but his greatest friend. It has been suggested that when in 1840 the gravediggers disturbed the "filled-up" vault of Sir Thomas they must have first come upon the skeleton of John Jeffery, and that therefore the low, depressed skull is that of the archdeacon and not the philosopher. A picture of the archdeacon disposes of this possibility. The vicar was even more noble-browed than his great parishioner !

At first sight the conclusion drawn from the skull and the portraits seems almost irresistible. For could such a skull boast a brow so nobly shaped? Yet we know that artists are necessarily idealists. Portraits were in quite early times types rather than likenesses. Even when they became likenesses, something typical remained. In Caroline days may it not have been the fashion to give eminent men the high

CLERGY.

THE REV. CANON MEYRICK, The Vicarage.

THE REV. A. W. E. MCCOMB, St. John's Rectory,
Unthank Road.

SOME SERVICES.

Sunday.—8, Holy Communion, also 12 on 1st and 3rd Sunday; Matins, 11; Children's Service, 3, on 1st Sunday; Evensong, 6.45.

Weekday Celebrations of the Holy Communion.—
Tuesday, 7.30; Thursday for Sick and Aged, 11.30;
Friday, 7.

Holy Baptism.—1st Sunday at 3.

For other Services see Notice Board.

Muta Bene.

Corporate Communion at 8 a.m.:—

Aug. 3. **Self-Assessment Fellowship.**

“ 10. **Mancroft Men's Club.**

“ 17. **Church Council.**

“ 24. **Sunday School Teachers and
Scholars.**

Sunday, August 24th, is the **Feast of St.
Bartholomew.** Holy Communion, 8 a.m.

Classes for **Holy Baptism, Confirmation,
and First Communion**, will begin in the first
week in October. The full names and addresses
of candidates should be put on the papers, sup-
plied by the Verger, and put into the Vicar's box.

Parochialia.

From Aug. 7th to Aug. 31st the Rev. G. H. Morse will be at the Vicarage and will, with Mr. McComb's help, take the services at Mancroft. He will welcome the Tennis Club on Tuesdays and Fridays and the Bowls players on Wednesday evenings as usual.

There will be Celebrations on Tuesdays at 7.30 and Fridays at 7.

Mr. Morse, whose father was for many years Vicar of Caistor near Norwich, has been working for many years in New Zealand. We feel sure the people of Mancroft will make the stay of Mr. and Mrs Morse a happy one.

BAZAAR.—The Fish Pond will be arranged by the Sunday School Teachers—not by the children as announced last month. Miss Steward will look for all the teachers' help.

* * *

A Competition Stall is being arranged for the Bazaar, on October 2nd.

Entries will be divided into the following classes:—

- (1) Plain Needlework.
- (2) Fancy Needlework, Embroidery, Drawn Thread Work, etc.
- (3) Knitting.
- (4) Crochet Work.
- (5) Toys, Dolls, Golliwogs, Stuffed Animals, etc.
- (6) Open Class—Wood Work, Metal Work, Leather Work, Drawing, Painting, etc.
- (7) Special Cake-making Competition.

Full particulars can be obtained from Miss Cozens, 21, Tombland. Intending competitors should apply not later than Saturday, Sept. 20th.

Two Prizes, value 5/- and 2/6, will be given for each Class (except No. 7) in which there are not less than 15 entries. In Class 7 the prizes will be given by Messrs. Latham & Co., Ltd, Proprietors of "Cakeoma."

There will be no entrance fee, but competitors must keep the following rules:—

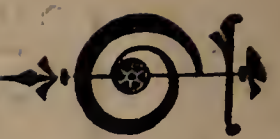
- (1) All articles sent in for competition to be given to the Bazaar.
- (2) Materials to cost not more than 2/6.
- (3) The Judges' decisions to be final.

The Competition will close on Saturday, September 27th, and all articles must be sent in by that date to Miss Cozens, 21, Tombland, NORWICH.

It is hoped that all Members of the Congregation and their friends will do their utmost to make the Competition a success.

* * *

The children of our Sunday School had a glorious half-day. It is an open question whether they enjoyed the sea at Cromer or the drive to Cromer most. The rain that fell on our homeward journey did not matter. It was a real joy to see small children of four years old (and we took many of them) having their first introduction to the sea. Some rushed into it as into Mother's arms, others treated it with suspicion and would let it take no liberties with them. For all the very careful preparation we are much indebted to Miss Steward, Miss Hill, Mrs. A. E. King, and Miss B. Steward.



THE original Church was founded in 1080 by Ralf de Guader, Earl of Norfolk, who afterwards rebelled against the Conqueror and defended the Castle for a month against the king's troops. The present Church was entirely re-built in 1430 in the then prevailing style of architecture (Perpendicular), finished and consecrated 1455.

The chief features of the interior are its extremely light architecture, the fine Tower Arch, the 34 clerestory Windows, the beautiful open timber Roof ornamented with fan groining, and the East Window of 42 panels, 35 of which are of ancient glass.

The Canopy over the Font was restored in 1887; the four pillars, four pendants, and roof are of 15th Century date. The Tapestry by the font is said to be Flemish, date 1573, and was formerly the Altar-piece. It represents: The Resurrection; The Appearance to St. Mary Magdalene in the Garden, to the Disciples on the Road to Emmaus; and the traditional Appearance of our Lord to His Mother. The Picture of "Barabbas at the foot of the Cross" was given by the Artist, Sir W. B. Richmond, K.C.B., in 1908.

THE TREASURY.

The Sacristy, East of the Altar, is full of interest to the antiquary. It contains the remnant of the **Magnificent Treasure** of the 13th to the 16th Century. It is lighted by five quaint, recessed windows, with broad, old oak sills. The roof is of open timber, and rests on oak brackets supported by ancient wooden corbel heads. The doors in this room are very massive, and the door by which we enter has a very fine **15th Century lock**, still intact, the huge key of which not only locks but also secures a strong bar across the door into slots cut in the masonry. In the South wall is an **ancient Piscina**, still in use, and a shallow recess which opens into a flue. Here, it is said, a charcoal fire used to be lighted to heat the irons for pressing out the wafers, and very probably for kindling the incense. Amongst the many other things of interest are:

1. Beautifully carved **Alabaster Panel** of Female Saints, found by a sexton in the Churchyard when digging a grave, said to be part of the original Altar-piece.
2. A **Fine Inlaid Table**, date Charles II., formerly the sounding-board over the pulpit.
3. **Ringers' Jug**, of Norwich pottery, 1749, holding 36 pints.
4. The plate from the coffin of **Sir Thomas Browne, M.D.**

5. **Old English Coins and Tokens** found in the Churchyard, &c.
6. **13th Century Illuminated Manuscript** of St. Paul's Epistles.

7. A MSS. copy of the **Vulgate, 1340**, beautifully written on extremely fine vellum.

8. A 15th Century Treasury Chest, containing the **Church Registers** in 23 vols., **complete from 1538**.

9. Curious **16th Century Flemish Picture** of the Resurrection.

10. **Picture of St. Peter Mancroft Ringers** ringing out the Old Year, with the famous old Jug.

11. **Picture of The Thorn in the Flesh**, a quaint conception of a toad-like devil piercing St. Paul's leg. This very curious picture is said to be English, and of early 17th Century work.

12. **Portrait of Sir Thomas Browne**—one of the three originals that exist.

13. A **16th Century Chasuble**, lent by the Vicar.

THE CHURCH PLATE.

The **Church Plate** is said to be the finest possessed by any one Church in England. There are 17 pieces, of which three cups, two covers, and one paten belong to the **Tudor period**, including the well-known **Gleane cup**, of which Blomfield, a local historian, says: "A most noble standing cup and cover, as great a curiosity and elegant piece of workmanship as is almost anywhere to be seen." This superb cup was presented to St. Peter Mancroft Church, in 1633, by Sir Peter Gleane, an eminent merchant of Norwich. There is also a small **pre-Reformation thistle-shaped Cup**, with cover surmounted by a Roman soldier. This is the only piece of plate known with the date letter 1543.

During the summer months, and at almost any other time by appointment, the Verger, in whose family the office has been for generations, and who can give an entertaining description of the Church and its many points of interest, attends to show the Church and Treasury Room to visitors.

Visitors are requested to give a small fee to the Fabric Fund. The Church, which is very poorly endowed, is mainly supported by voluntary contributions.

F. J. MEYRICK, Vicar.

forehead that we see in Van Dyck's Charles I in the Wallace Collection, or in his Henrietta Maria in the National Portrait Gallery?

On the whole we believe, then, the tradition is true that the antiquary knew what he was doing when he rifled the grave and "knav'd" the skull, and that the governors of the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital have been guarding the great man's skull for nearly eighty years. The unbroken tradition in the sexton's family carries great weight. The Potters for four generations have all been faithful servants of the church, and the present verger, Mr. Douro Potter, is entirely convinced that the skull which the hospital authorities are returning to the church is the skull that held the brain that gave birth to the *Religio Medici*.

If a great scholar—Dr. E. Browne—wrote the Latin inscription on the coffin plate in 1682, another great scholar—Dr. Pollock, Bishop of Norwich—has in 1922 written that which is to mark the spot in the chancel of St. Peter Mancroft where the skull will lie. It is as follows:

O caput augustum, Petro custode sepulchri
Sit tibi pax; nomen vivat in urbe; vale.

